

RUSH HOUR:
The raft struggles to get past the Chooka rapid in the Kali-Sarda river

ROCK 'N' ROLLA!

Stephen Cunliffe is back from a week-long thrilling, thumping ride down the Class III+ rapids of the Kali-Sarda river, which he describes as the ultimate way to see the lower reaches of the Kumaon Himalayas



As I approached the roaring rapid, I looked downstream and saw Canadian safety kayaker Dave Prothero vigorously pumping his fist in the air: it was the signal that the rapid was safe and we could run the meatiest part of the wild water-just ahead. As I lined up my small boat to hit the guts of the rapid, I watched Captain Rana guide his raft into the white-water mayhem in front of me. One moment the raft was cruising through the big waves, next second it disappeared, swallowed by the gurgling, growling rapid. It suddenly dawned on me that this rapid was big, really big. My heart was racing; turning back was not an option. I took a deep breath and dug my paddle in propelling the 'ducky' forward as if my life depended upon it.

As the fury of the rushing river grew ominously louder, I recalled trip leader Dhruv Naresh Rana's earlier advice. "Only paddle the ducky if you're thirsty for adventure and aren't scared of taking a few swims!" Thrill-addict that I am, I opted to trade my place in the relative comfort and safety of a big self-bailing raft for an adrenaline-pumping solo-seat in the small unstable ducky: best described as an inflatable kayak prone to capsizing.

By now I was engulfed in frothing white-water and paddling hard. Waves crashed over the ducky and spray obscured my vision. I was charging into the furious rapid when suddenly a gigantic gaping hole opened up in the river just ahead. It appeared as if the river was being sucked down and swallowed by a gigantic standing wave. I knew I was supposed to keep paddling into the three-metre wave at the bottom of the chute, but I involuntarily froze midway through my paddle stroke. There was no way a ducky could get through this. As my boat crashed into the wall of water and sent me flying, I had the presence of mind to suck down one last deep breath. For an instant I was airborne, then the wild river swallowed me. I tried to relax. Within seconds my life jacket rocketed me to the surface and I gasped for breath as I swam through the remainder of the white-water.

Through the waves I saw Dave paddling his safety kayak hard towards me. As soon as he saw me signal I was OK, he started laughing and cheering. Once he had towed me to the safety of the riverbank, a big smile spread across my face. I wanted an action-packed white-water adventure, and I certainly felt I was getting my money's worth!

Not everyone enjoys swimming through rapids, and sturdy rafts provide a welcome sanctuary to those who are looking for a more tranquil ride through the class III+ rapids on this big volume pool-

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THE BRAVEHEARTS:
(Facing page)
Members of the Kali-Sarda team; halting at the Pari camp on Day 5

THE VISTAS:

The river winds through the beautifully-scaped Niddle village nestled among green hills

The river flows past the terraced farms of Kumaoni **and Nepali villages, gigantic white-sand beaches,** and dense tropical jungles with plentiful wildlife



SILVER SANDS: Middle camp (Day 2) comes alive with Yoga sessions and bonfires; (*facing page*) braving the Dimberghat rapid in an inflatable kayak or ducky



A trip down the Kali-Sarda is a week-long, action-packed **adventure with the exciting grade III white-water** to keep you entertained during your descent



drop river. For the majority of the week-long descent, the Kali-Sarda is a benign river, peacefully snaking its way through a wilderness paradise under blue skies and blazing sunshine with only the occasional puffy white cloud to enhance the picture-perfect setting.

Hans Bohnenblust, a kayaker from Switzerland, enthused, "The Kali-Sarda offers a truly holistic river experience with beautiful scenery, great beach campsites, social campfires under star-studded skies and some entertaining white-water on a journey through a chunk of genuine Indian wilderness." As if to corroborate his musings, when we beached our boats later that afternoon, fresh leopard tracks criss-crossed the white-sands of our riverside campsite.

A self-contained river journey down the Kali-Sarda is arguably the ultimate way to see the lower reaches of the Kumaon Himalaya. The complete lack of road access makes for a real wilderness experience. From the put-in point at Jhulaghat, the river flows past the terraced farms of Kumaoni and Nepali villages, gigantic white-sand beaches, and dense tropical jungles with plentiful wildlife. It's a predominantly peaceful river journey through deep valleys and pristine wilderness.

After the first few days of serene floating, you pass the confluence with the Saryu river and the famous mahseer fishing spot at Pancheshwar. Suddenly the big rapids – Dimberghat and mighty Chooka – loom large on the horizon: a final white-water challenge that's sure to get the adrenalin flowing before the expedition terminates at Boom on the outskirts of Tanakpur.

A trip down the Kali-Sarda is a weeklong, action-packed adventure with the bonus of warm water and exciting (rather than terrifying) grade III white-water to keep you suitably entertained during your descent. The river offers an unparalleled outdoor wilderness experience perfectly suited to first-time rafters and experienced white-water addicts alike. India's best-kept secret delivers on every level: weather, wilderness, wildlife and white-water.

NAVIGATOR: The Kali-Sarda river is located in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. The easiest option for getting there is to take the overnight Ranikhet Express from Old Delhi station to Kathgodam. At Kathgodam, transfer to the service provider's vehicles for an eight-hour drive via Bhimtal (breakfast stop) and Almora to Pithoragarh, which lies 35 km from the usual put-in point at Jhulaghat. The Kali can be rafted from October to March, with Oct/Nov and Feb/March offering optimal weather conditions. Aquaterra (www.aquaterra.in) has fixed-departure Kali trips scheduled for February 11-19 and October 15-23, 2011. The week-long expeditions cost Rs 30,398 (including tax). Contact Fay Singh (fay@aquaterra.in) to make a booking. For further information, log on to www.treknraft.com/river_rafting_india.htm 